Entre héritage et devenir: La construction de la famille juive


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While its outward features may have changed, the importance of family as a central feature of Jewish identity has remained constant. The central place of the family in the Jewish imagination was the inspiration behind the creation of *Entre héritage et devenir: La construction de la famille juive*. This edited volume was compiled in honour of the retirement of Joseph Mélèze-Modrzejewski, professor emeritus of ancient history at the University of Paris I and his wife Lydia. Far from simply celebrating the role of the family, the editor of this collection, Patricia Hidiroglou, argues that « la construction de la famille juive apparaît comme reposant sur la double exigence de la fidélité à l’héritage d’une part, et de l’autre, de la présence au monde, de l’inscription dans le monde. » (34) In other words, scholars cannot understand the construction of the Jewish family in different times and places without understanding the dynamic tension between the desire to remain true to tradition and the need to integrate into the larger world. Unfortunately, as Hidiroglou makes clear, despite the important place of the Jewish family, the history of the Jewish family remains a neglected area of research. What work has been done is largely superficial and suffers from a lack of comparison. Historians need to take an increasingly comparative, interdisciplinary, and international approach to their work, by borrowing from the work of anthropologists and engaging with the work of scholars in other countries.

This offering to the field of family history contains thirteen articles divided into three sections, in addition to a preface, an introduction, and a glossary. The first section, Le Contrat social, contains four articles and deals largely with the institution of marriage, its laws and customs, and consequences. André Lemaire’s contribution, “L’héritage des femmes: bible, épigraphie et papyrologie,” deals with the inheritance rights of widows and daughters. While limited in the strict application of Jewish law, the right of certain women to inherit was accorded in practice using marriage contracts. Liliane Vana comes to much the same conclusion in “Fiançailles et mariage à l’époque hellénénistique et romaine: halakah (lois) et coutume,” her study of Jewish laws and customs of betrothal and marriage in Greek and Roman times. While Jewish laws remained essentially the same throughout the period in question, the use of marriage contracts tempered the legal disenfranchisement of women. Moving forward several centuries, Gérard Nahon looks at conflict over marrano families in “Verts paradis et gras pâturagse: le mariage clandestine d’Abraham Roblès (1741).” Through this fascinating case study, Nahon concludes that economic and political considerations ultimately triumphed over romantic feelings in the selection of spouses in France. Finally, Sarah Goldstein’s “La haltisah ou cérémonie de déchaussement: un procedure d’interruption de contrat social” looks at the symbolism of shoes and spit in the haltisah, the ritual ceremony which severs a widow’s connection to her in-laws following the death of her spouse.
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The second section, Éducation, mémoire, identité, deals primarily with the education of children as a way of ensuring cultural and intellectual continuity and fostering Jewish identity. Jean Baumgarten’s thoughtful piece, “L’éducation des enfants dans les livres de morale en Yiddish (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles),” argues that historians must also consider popular texts written in vernacular languages in addition to rabbinical documents. Conduct books from the period indicate that Jewish women were considered primarily responsible for educating the next generation and transmitting Jewish culture. In “Enfants sans parents: la mobilisation identitaire en France au lendemain de la Shoah,” Katty Hazan looks at the fate of Jewish children orphaned or partially orphaned because of the Holocaust. While never a substitute for parents, orphanages often provided a loving environment and fostered deep emotional bonds between the children and caregivers. Enric Proqueres I Gené looks at conversos marriages in “Définition des identités familiales chez les Xuertes de Majorque.” Rather than considering the family as a unit, it is important to understand differences and disputes both within and between families. Georges Drettas looks at the problems faced by Jewish immigrants in modern Greece in “Statut, communauté, famille: Le versant masculin de la réalité romainote.” By looking at how Greek and Jewish systems of identification came into conflict following the end of the Second World War, he offers some thoughts on how Jewish identity is maintained in the secular world. Finally, Hidiroglou looks at the fascinating custom of gifting seven pairs of shoes to the bride at the henna ceremony among French Sephardic Jewish immigrants from Tunisia in “Coutume et mémoire en héritage: reinterpretation du henné et de la bèlgha.” Hidiroglou painstakingly deconstructs the symbolism involved in every aspect of the ceremony and demonstrates how certain customs passed down in immigrant communities come to implicitly embody their culture.

The third and final section, Représentations, modèles et réalités, looks at various representations of family models and provides case studies illustrating strategies adopted by Jewish immigrant communities in adapting to new environments. In the first piece of this section, Alexandre Messer and Charlotte Szagin-Messer look at three generations of a theatre family in “Les Kaminski dans le théâtre Yiddish de Pologne.” Messer and Szagin-Messer are particularly interested in how Yiddish theatre blurred the boundaries between representation and reality of relationships and how the family acted as a bulwark against political turmoil. Next, Claude Singer looks at the representations of Jewish families in “La famille et l’identité juive au cinéma.” The family is not always portrayed in a negative fashion, but as a refuge from a hostile outside world, an important factor in the transmission of Jewish identity, and a model and an inescapable reference point. In “L’épigraphie funéraire contemporaine: contribution à l’histoire des concepts familiaux,” Philippe Pierret attempts to reconstruct the origins and history of Jewish families in Brussels since the eighteenth century though epitaphs. He traces the difference between “profane” inscriptions and religious ones, and how they were adapted to fit particular situations and contexts. Simone Mrejen-O’Hana probes Jewish demographics in “Familles juives en Europe et en Amérique du XVIIIe au XXe siècle.” In particular, she looks at the myth of Jewish fecundity and the Jewish family as a model for modern demographic changes. In the final and concluding article, Lisa Anteb Yemini looks at the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel as a model of the post-nuclear family in “Migration et nuptialité: la transition du système matrimonial des juifs éthiopiens en Israël.” as a model of the post-nuclear family. Anteb Yemini analyses Ethiopian Jews strategies in their traditions to Israeli and orthodox cultural practices over time.
This collection succeeds in a number of different areas. One of the perennial problems with edited collections is their lack of cohesion. And while some may argue that this volume lacks a sense of unity, the diversity is purposeful and refreshing; Hidiroglou lives up to her call for interdisciplinarity, internationalism, and more comparative studies. As noted earlier, the articles in the collection deal with everything from marriage contracts in Ancient Greece, to single mothers in Ethiopia, and several make an effort to include comparative data to bolster their arguments. Further, the contributors come from a variety of backgrounds, including history, religious studies, archaeology, philosophy, and Hebrew studies, and they employ a variety of approaches. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of this collection is the integration of religious studies with history. The authors of these articles do not discount religious beliefs and how they influence behaviour.

And while not all of the articles succeed in practice, the overall result is a depth and breadth that is sometimes lacking in North American studies of Jewish culture. At the same time, this collection also complicates that history by providing information about historical European Jewish customs that can only serve to enhance our understanding of North American Jewish culture. For instance, Baumgarten’s argument, as discussed above, has some interesting implications for Rickie Berman and Paula Hyman’s arguments that this only became a central part of Judaism following the immigration of Eastern European Jews to Western Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, Anteby-Yemini’s piece stands out for its sensitive analysis of a group of Jews that are largely missing from historical works: Ethiopians Jews. Her discussion of the dynamics between host and immigrant communities when both are Jewish is innovative and illuminating.

That said, there are some problems with this collection. The lack of a definition for “family” is a serious omission. This term is applied uncritically: it usually refers to a biblical clan or nuclear-style family. There is no effort to problematize the term and venture outside of these models. Anteby-Yemini’s piece is a notable exception. She makes it a point to discuss families constituted through divorce, abandonment, blended families, and single mothers. More problematic is the lack of a definition of “Jew.” One of the important points of this collection is to demonstrate the diverse experiences of Jews across time and space. Though commendable, I was left wondering what unites all of the individuals under discussion. It is equally important to look for commonalities as well as differences. Finally, while the articles in this collection do not glorify the Jewish family, at times they concentrate more on the benefits and pleasures than the dangers of family life. Contentious issues like incest are mentioned, but not discussed in detail. The same is true for the implications of male domination for the women in the family.

Nonetheless, this collection is a significant contribution to the study of Jewish history. It is useful to scholars who study the status of Jewish women, Jewish families, Jewish marriage practices, cultural transmission, and the immigration process. Many of articles in this collection would also be useful in teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in Jewish history or family history. Not only do they provide much material for discussion, but they are largely written in a straightforward and easy to understand style.

References